

English 10 – Article of the Week #4

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What We Build Together

by WILLIAM E. WHITE AUG. 31, 2012

Citizenship is not an innate human quality. "We the People" are not born understanding civic responsibilities; we have to learn them. We must teach children that they are a resource for the republic. Education is essential. Children are our nation's common wealth. They must understand their civic responsibilities, appreciate their American heritage, value the Enlightenment ideals on which our republic is founded, and be prepared to engage in the robust debate among citizens that guides and shapes the future of the republic. It is we who must make certain that they can. At stake is nothing less than the future of the commonwealth, the future of our republic.

Americans constantly strive to balance private enterprise and the common good. We celebrate individual achievements -- be they physical, intellectual, spiritual, or financial -- because these accomplishments are symbols of our individual worth -- our private wealth, if you will. Yet we understand that there is much we cannot accomplish alone, so we work cooperatively to build a common infrastructure within our families, our businesses, our religious and civic organizations, and on local, state, and national levels. This common infrastructure is essential to individual success. Everyone benefits from our system of laws, the roads we drive on, fire and police departments, public utilities, access to clean air and water, libraries and museums, national and state parks, and the peaceful cities, towns, and communities we live in.

How much of our private resources (including money, time, reputation, skills, and so forth) should we contribute to build this infrastructure of common good? And what kinds of common good should we strive to build? Do we, as a society, really need roads, waterways, railways, and communications systems? Will they improve commerce and increase the private wealth of businesses and individuals? What about libraries, parks, and cultural venues? Do they improve the quality of our communities? How about the nation's natural resources -- clean water, air, land, forests, plant and animal life? What's the proper balance, in other words, of our private wealth and our common wealth?

The debate about balancing private enterprise and common good is healthy and vibrant in American life. It goes back beyond the early days of the republic, when debates about public investment in roads and canals dominated the news. Generations of Americans have proven that a strong commonwealth supports and encourages the creation of private wealth -- just as private wealth is essential to the creation of a strong commonwealth.

Nowhere is this discussion more important than in education. There is a lot of talk today implying that the purpose of education is job training -- that public education exists solely to create private wealth. Educate children so that they can contribute to the economy! Provide the scientists, engineers, and mathematicians that our 21st-century technological society requires (STEM education)! But it is not enough just to create good workers. Our nation will not survive if our education system merely produces economic units. We must

safeguard the future of the republic by educating to increase the most essential national resource -- the single most important common wealth in the United States: informed, engaged citizens.

As we send our children back to school, we must remember that the purpose of education is to create both private wealth and common wealth. Americans already spend more per capita than any other country to educate our children. It takes more than just money to create a great education system. And we can't point to teachers and say it's all their responsibility, that they have to do a better job. Good education requires engagement of the whole community. Recent MetLife and Gates Foundation studies remind us that every student needs engaged parental support and guidance. Our community and business leaders, too, need to show students from kindergarten to college-age that they value education. That's what the Oklahoma Foundation for Excellence does -- it is a consortium of leaders coming together "to recognize and encourage academic excellence."

Each individual in this commonwealth has a responsibility. Each of us needs to become educators for our nation's children. Encourage civic responsibility. It is your most important legacy to the children in your life -- sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, godchildren, friends, and acquaintances. Volunteer to help in a local school -- join the PTA or a mentor program, support internship opportunities for students, consider donations to and attendance at school events, be a teacher advocate, be a student advocate.

When you engage, you join in this essential debate about the private wealth of individuals, and the common wealth it creates in your community. If you join the conversation, you help build the private wealth and common wealth, not just of your community but of our republic.

Words alone are not enough. Our children need you to be a good example -- to be an engaged citizen who accepts the responsibility of ensuring the future of our republic. Invest in them. They are your private wealth and the common wealth of the republic. It's time that we recognize it. It's time that each of us -- every citizen -- takes responsibility for it.

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Answer the following questions on another sheet of paper.

- 1) What is the author's purpose?
- 2) Who is the intended audience?
- 3) Write a paragraph explaining your point of view in response to the topic.